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ETCHINGS OF
WILLIAM STRANGARA

THE GREAT



ETCHERS



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THE HEDGER

FROM THE MEZZOTINT BY WILLIAM STRANG, A.R.A.

ETCHINGS OF WILLIAM STRANGARA



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THE ETCHINGS AND
ENGRAVINGS OF
WILLIAM STRANG, A.R.A.
BY FRANK NEWBOLT



IN the world of artistic appreciation, as in all other worlds, the whirligig of time brings about strange revolutions of thought. The goal of yesterday is the starting-post of to-morrow. When a few years ago Mr. Strang withdrew from the Royal Society of Painter Etchers as a protest against the threatened introduction of reproductive work into the pioneer Society of original expression in engraving no one could have predicted that he would ever enter the Royal Academy.

Of all his plates, which number over 500, only one solitary specimen was ever exhibited at Burlington House ; and the Academy has been conspicuous not only for its neglect of etching in general, but in particular for slighting that kind of etching in which Mr. Strang excels.

However, the unlikely often happens ; and now, some time after the execution of his last plate, at a period when Mr. Strang is turning to coloured drawings, silver-points and oil paintings, he finds himself, even after exhibiting oil paintings, elected as an engraver, and standing where no original engraver has before stood.

It is at this point in his career, when we may look forward to the production of many important works, that we have to consider the past, and form a rough estimate of the powers and achievement of a living artist.

What are the qualities which have placed Mr. Strang so conspicuously in the front rank of original etchers and engravers ? We can only answer this question by studying his proofs, and we are fortunate enough to be able to reproduce nearly fifty examples from engraved plates. A complete illustrated catalogue is being published separately in Glasgow. The whole sum of Mr. Strang's work comprises etchings on copper, zinc and pewter, engravings, mezzotints,

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aquatints, dry-points, woodcuts, line engravings, silver-point drawings, lithographs, coloured drawings, water-colours and oil paintings; but it would be outside the province of this book to deal with what does not fairly come within the definition of original engraved work on a metal plate. It is impossible to introduce the great catalogue here, but it is interesting to note, as evidence of the artist's own predilections and the appreciation of his special gifts by various publishers, what kind of books he has been engaged to illustrate. Sometimes the plates have been issued with letterpress, as in Mr. Singer's book and the "Pilgrim's Progress," and sometimes without, as in the "Don Quixote" and "Kipling" series. Taken more or less in chronological order they include the following: "Aiken Drum," a ballad by William Nicholson, a lowland Scotch pedlar (7 plates), Robert Burns (9), Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress" (14), "Death and the Ploughman's Wife," an original ballad (11), "The Earth Fiend," an original ballad (10), Lessing's "Nathan the Wise" (8), Monkhouse's "Christ on the Hill" (9), Milton's "Paradise Lost" (12), Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner" (13), Hans Singer's "Methods of Printing Pictures" (6), Miss Sargent's "Ballads" (6), Mr. Laurence Binyon's "Bruges" (10), Mr. Rudyard Kipling's "Short Stories" (30), Izaak Walton's "Compleat Angler" (10), and Cervantes' "Don Quixote" (30).

Besides these, half a dozen figure-studies were published in the "Portfolio," and about the same number in a large, cheap series known as "English Etchings"; many have appeared from time to time in the Painter Etchers' Annual Exhibitions in Pall Mall, and in the usual smaller exhibitions arranged by picture-dealers; and many have never been exhibited or published at all.

Some chalk portraits were reproduced by photo-lithography in the "Court and Society Review," and many woodcuts have appeared from time to time as, for example in "The Book of Giants," but with these we have for the moment nothing to do.

An etched portrait of Robert Louis Stevenson—not the one here shown—was issued with "Vailima Letters," and several plates were executed as illustrations for his short stories, but so far they have not been published.

It is impossible to realise, to recollect or to deal with so vast an array of pictures, but there are, of course, some leading characteristics common to all, and though even the most general observation may be contradicted by a forgotten example we have a large number here to refer to as illustrations of qualities and aspects which particularly strike us.

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One of the most remarkable things about them is that, though few are very recent, they were all produced by a man who was born in 1859. They represent, therefore, little more than twenty years' work. The imagination almost fails to grasp the relentless industry which this implies.

But let us consider for a moment the beginning of things.

As a boy Mr. Strang shared with Méryon (of whom he had never heard) the ambition to be a sailor, combined with a strong desire to become an artist. Meanwhile he was a clerk in the office of a great firm of shipbuilders on the Clyde, and though he actually ran away from home with the intention of going to sea, he soon ran back again, and convinced his family that he could draw well enough to deserve a chance of becoming an artist. So to the Slade School he accordingly came, and there met and studied under Sir Edward Poynter, who has now welcomed him, after so long an interval, to the Royal Academy. Poynter, however, was soon succeeded by Legros, under whom Strang worked for six years, assimilating those ideas and methods which when communicated and taught by a great master could be absorbed by one pupil in a thousand, and so he grew up under an artistic influence which left an indelible impression upon his life.

From being a pupil he became a teacher, and helped the Professor by taking the etching class. It was the severe discipline of these early years which gave the etcher his equipment for the battle, or rather the campaign, which was to follow. If he had not had the rare endowment of an original mind his perfect technical skill would have been of scarcely more than mechanical value, but without his rigorous training he could never have expressed adequately the creations of his copious fancy.

He was throughout strongly influenced by Legros, and amongst others, to whom he owes much, some plates specially suggest the names of Dürer, Van Dyck, Rembrandt, Millet, and Goya; but all etchers learn by studying the works of great masters, and it is rather Mr. Strang's versatility that strikes us than any want of originality. This is indeed the last defect with which he will be charged. His originality is, if anything, rather too aggressive. Every plate is a challenge to the champions of mediocrity and conventionality, who, having suffered a succession of rude shocks, are now standing agape at the reception of their antagonist into the very temple of their faith.

Our illustrations comprise rather less than one-tenth of Mr. Strang's engraved work, and they have been separately chosen for

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different reasons too numerous to mention. For simplicity of criticism I propose to divide them into the following five classes :

- Biblical subjects (5),
- Portraits (10),
- Landscapes (7),
- Illustrations (12),
- General subjects, unclassified (15).

Having made this division, we are at once reminded that an etching which is an illustration of a well-known incident, or story, does not appeal to the same intellectual faculty as one which is merely the expression of the artist's fancy. For instance, "The Ruined Castle" leaves you free to form any theory which the various elements of the picture suggest, while "The Puppet Show" makes a special appeal to those familiar with "Don Quixote," and "The Supper at Emmaus" can never be seen by any one who has not already formed some conception of the scene which it depicts. Again, the "Portrait of a Lady" will be judged by most only upon its merits as an etching, which cannot be said of the "Lord Tennyson," a picture of a face well known to everybody.

This fact is an advantage to the artist in some of his attempts, and a disadvantage in others. It helps him with such plates as "Dorothea," where he rides on the pinions of Cervantes; but it is a positive hindrance in his Biblical subjects, unless he is appealing to one who has studied his method, and understands the limitations of his art.

BIBLICAL SUBJECTS

Of all the plates in this class, it may be said that they show striking originality of thought, and a sombre reverence. Few, if any, previous illustrators of the Bible have struck this note of simple dignity, or have avoided so surely the febleness of design which creates the commonplace.

"Manoah's Offering" is by far the earliest of the series, and as a triumph over the difficulties of etching it would be remarkable, if it were not still more striking as a design. For so young a man as Mr. Strang was when he completed it, the etching gave promise of a great career. That it was rejected by the publisher for whom it was executed because the angel had no wings, and the etcher refused to give him any, is one of the amusing incidents of the past.

By many who love the perfect completeness of its detail, and the subtle simplicity of the woman's figure, it will be preferred to the

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“Supper at Emmaus” ; but this plate also, besides showing a careful study of the recognised canons of etching, is a fine composition. Like many others, one might almost say all, of Mr. Strang’s plates, it preserves a wonderful simplicity and unity of effect, and exhibits his great power of arrangement. This quality is vital to every picture, but in a special degree to an etching, and most of all to an etching of figures.

“The Nativity” is an etching which has been strengthened with dry-point. This means that the copper-plate has been first etched with acid, and then scratched with a needle so as to raise a rough edge to certain lines.

The same method has been adopted in “The Adoration of the Kings,” a plate which has been cut down.

The “Women at the Cross” is entirely a dry-point, though it might be thought that there was originally some etching on the plate. It reminds us that next to his skill in arranging the various elements of a picture, form, colour, action, chiaroscuro, and so on, Mr. Strang’s work is undoubtedly remarkable above that of all his rivals for the facility with which he gives an attitude. No artist in England can have drawn more legs and arms than he has, and no two of his figures are the same. Their correctness is not a question simply of anatomy, or of composition, but of some delicate combination of the two which is difficult to analyse. He nearly always avoids violence of action, being convinced that it does not make for strength. Against action itself, he has, of course, no such feeling, as many of his plates will show.

PORTRAITS

Amongst the ten portraits reproduced it is difficult to choose ; but it is safe to say that no better etchings exist.

The method adopted challenges comparison with Van Dyck, who invented, perhaps unintentionally, the freely etched “unfinished” portrait. But the Flemish painter had no technical training, and produced very few plates, so it is not remarkable that, after nearly three hundred years, students of his ideas have bettered their instruction. In the “J. B. Clark” the head is placed as Van Dyck would have placed it, without even a line below the collar to distract attention from the beautiful drawing, and sheer presentment of character. It is all done in one biting without any stopping out, or retouching. In Lord Lindley’s portrait, drawn in his robes as a Lord Justice of Appeal, we have the indication of accessories, also in

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Van Dyck's manner, but with more perfect technique. This is a worthy presentment of a great judge.

The "W. Sharp" is an equally noble piece of workmanship, and the absolutely natural "Monkhouse" shows a clear delineation of mental force ; but both are equalled, if not surpassed, by the Quixote-like study of Mr. Cunninghame Graham, first etched, and then finished in dry-point, most of the burr being removed. It is difficult to select a subject among these for special commendation, but I doubt if there is a more beautiful etched portrait in the world than the one last named.

"Lord Tennyson," which is obviously done in a coarser medium, and might be contrasted unfavourably with the others, unless explained, is on a zinc plate, and was part of a novel experiment. It was to be printed in line on the top of an impression in colours from another zinc plate ; but the experiment was not a success, and Mr. Strang now thinks colour inappropriate for metal plates.

In his portrait of himself as an etcher he has struggled successfully with the difficulties of dry-point, and has not troubled to reverse his subject. The proof, therefore, shows him etching with his left hand. The artist's robust method makes nothing of such trifles, though "The Woodcutter," it will be noticed later, which appears to be left-handed, is not really so. The "R. L. Stevenson" is a charming and sympathetic portrait of a "brither Scot," from a drawing made at "Skerry-vore," and the "Portrait of a Lady" is a good example of a completely finished plate.

The leading characteristic of all the portraits is their simplicity of style, and certainty of execution. And though strikingly exemplified in them, these qualities are not confined to any one subject. We see them, more or less, in every plate. But the slight errors and weak lines visible in the work of most etchers are more noticeable in portraits than in landscapes. Mr. Strang's portraits stand out even amongst his own work as brightly polished gems. Such certain draughtsmanship is rare and difficult. Its value is generally underestimated.

LANDSCAPES

The individual note is more marked than in the other subjects, because they give more play to the imagination. Many artists have executed plates which remind us of Van Dyck, but no one has produced a series of pictures at all like Mr. Strang's landscapes ; no one has illustrated books as he has illustrated them ; no one has pro-

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duced etchings with the character of those which are here classified last. Portraiture, however, remains the most difficult branch of the art, because a good etching of a head is not necessarily a good portrait. The special qualities of the sitter, and of the medium, have to be combined without the sacrifice of either, and this is not always possible.

The landscapes are not transcripts from nature. They are not etched direct. A scene gives the artist an idea, which he embodies in a drawing; this he intends to be impressive, to reproduce in some measure the effect originally produced by nature on his own mind. Copying nature does not make it impressive, and we infer from the etchings that Mr. Strang's practice is to alter details so as to add to the impressiveness of his subject, while subordinating all detail to the broad and simple facts which he wishes to tell. He minimises or omits anything which interferes with his main idea.

"Dunglass," and "The Monument" both contain the national monument to Henry Bell, the inventor of the steamboat. In the former the artist has, with characteristic humour, introduced a steamer in the storm cloud on the right. The eye is, however, principally taken with the pretty Scotch house, and the fine biting of the lines. The other plate is chiefly remarkable for its composition, and the severity of its treatment.

In strong contrast to these is the zinc dry-point, "The Tower," which was originally a much larger plate with thinner tree-stems. By increasing these and cutting the plate the etcher has added substance and dignity to the design. The round tower gives an Italianesque suggestion of Corot, though the house itself is a modern one in Dumbarton.

"On the Hill" is scarcely a landscape at all, but serves as rather an extreme example to illustrate one of Mr. Strang's ideas, that the sentiment in landscape can best be shown by figures. It is worthy of a passing comment that there is no figure in the preceding plate, or in "Kilcreggan." What precise sentiment is indicated by the recumbent figure in "The Ruined Castle" it is difficult to say. From the romantic point of view I consider this to be the best of all the landscapes, but that is purely a matter of individual taste. The reproduction does not, of course, give the real beauty of a proof, but is sufficient to show how carefully the trees, the castle, and the distance have been studied, to say nothing of the figure. Who the man is, and what his relation to the castle, is a mystery which each observer may solve for himself.

"Kilcreggan" was etched from an oil sketch. It is simple,

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peaceful, and harmonious. In these two plates, as in others, it will be noticed that there is no indication of sky. The atmosphere is obtained by the correct relation of the various parts, and the lights on the buildings.

Besides "Sleepy Hollow," which was a spontaneous creation not referable to a particular scene, there are many other landscapes. The general impression that they leave upon us is similar to that produced by the series classed as "general," that they are the product of a powerful and original mind, self-assertive, careless of conventional ideas, and working out its purpose with pitiless force. Mr. Strang has no compassion for those who look for oaks or firs amongst his trees, or for delicate aerial distances beyond them. He has his own standard, and does not seek to approach that of any one else. He never begs for applause, but works out an idea in his own way, and then passes on, entirely regardless of praise or blame.

ILLUSTRATIONS TO BOOKS

"Dorothea" probably does not strike him (as it does me) as a more beautiful picture than "The Puppet Show," which he thinks the best of the "Don Quixote" set because it is so perfectly simple. There is no stopping out, and no second biting. There is certainly a suggestion of Rembrandt about it, and more than a suggestion of the humour of Cervantes: there is great individuality and power, and it is an effective illustration, but, compared with many other plates, such as, for instance, "In the Dungeon," it appears rough and unpolished. "Dorothea," on the other hand, contains a beautiful and romantic landscape, composed of the simplest possible materials, and the girl's figure, though not, perhaps, sufficiently delicate for the story and the scene, is graceful, well placed, and in keeping with the general scheme of the picture. The plate has been treated with an aquatint ground, the lights in the sky being scraped away. Dorothea, it will be remembered, was dressed in boy's clothes, bathing her feet, when she was discovered by Cardenio, the barber, and the Curate. "Her long and golden tresses covered not only her shoulders, but nearly her whole body; and her snowy fingers served her for a comb. Her beauty made the three spectators impatient to find out who she was . . ."

Aquatint is freely used in the "Don Quixote" illustrations, noticeably in the other example shown here, "Sancho and the Teeth," where it covers the sky, and shows up the high lights on the shirt,

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and the white horse. It is also effectively used in the Kipling series, and can here be seen in "Toomai of the Elephants" and "A Matter of Fact."

Mr. Strang went to Spain to study the local colour for "Don Quixote," and no doubt observed there, or at home, the dramatic effect produced by Goya in his etchings by the use of flat, bitten tones. The tint is more delicate and richer than that produced by sandgrain. In the aquatint process the acid bites the plate through a fine coat of resin: in the latter the plate is protected by a wax ground, through which sandpaper has made innumerable breaches. "Evening" is to a great extent done in this way, the heads being stopped out, but the plate was afterwards "rocked," or roughened with a "rocker," like an ordinary mezzotint plate, and scraped in the usual manner. Theoretically both processes are exceedingly simple, but in practice they are beset with pitfalls, and Mr. Strang's use of them to get his intended effects is marvellous. The horror of "A Matter of Fact" is partly due to the ghastly pallor given to the skin of the sea monsters by the skilful, and not too violent, use of the resin tint.

This is, however, only one of the constituents that combine in that dreadful picture to freeze the blood of the beholder. I believe that Mr. Kipling himself paradoxically declared it to be "too horrible for words." With all its fantastic imagination, however, it is not so penetrating, nor so long drawn out in its agony, as the story which it so ably illustrates. It shows

The blind white Sea-snake and his bride
Who, drowsing, nose the long-lost ships
Let down through darkness to their lips,

but it cannot give the whole gamut of their death struggle.

The other "short stories" pictured here are "A Disturber of Traffic" and "Toomai of the Elephants," and these plates are amongst the best of the series. The stories are so well known that it is scarcely necessary to do more than refer to them.

The "disturber" of the traffic, who lighted the Channel with wreck signals, ought (as I read the story) to have been depicted without his clothes, and Toomai appears rather too old and too large. He was a child four feet in height, and "smaller than a picket-pin"; however, his "great thatch of hair" is there, and the elephant is a grand beast. Some of the other Kipling pictures are blood-curdling. Mr. Strang has an abounding delight in adventures of all kinds, and forms an idea for a fine plate in every kind of scene which pen can

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describe. He sees a bullock slaughtered, and though physically nauseated, he cannot help seeing the artistic possibilities of the situation, and straightway produces an etching which gives us a faint reflection of the feelings which suggested it.

"The Ancient Mariner" seems a suitable book for Mr. Strang to illustrate, and in the two examples here given his success may be seen. In the one the tiresome old man has seized upon the wedding guest, who

Cannot choose but hear ;

and in the other we see the figures of Death and Life-in-Death dicing for the lives of the crew :

Her lips were red, her looks were free,
Her locks were yellow as gold ;
Her skin was white as leprosy,
The nightmare Life-in-Death was she,
Who thicks man's blood with cold.

This plate, executed in 1896, is a remarkably fine composition firmly etched in an almost classical manner and worthy of high praise.

Another, of which almost the same can be said, is that of "Christian and Hopeful in the Dungeon," one of the best from the "Pilgrim's Progress." It is a much earlier plate (1885), and even in the reproductions a great difference can be seen in the workmanship ; but without making any allowance for the fact that it is the work of a young man of six-and-twenty it is a remarkable study of the struggle with despair. The giant found them ". . . alive, and truly alive was all ; for now, what for want of bread and water and by reason of the wounds they received when he beat them, they could little but breathe"

The illustrations to the original ballad called "The Earth Fiend," published in 1892, are particularly interesting, because the artist is not hampered by the author. It is one of those rare occasions when the author cannot complain of misinterpretation. "Cupid Reaping" is a perfect piece of composition, conveying a charming idea, and the "Children Discovering Fiend" is a first-rate etching, looked at from any point of view, literary, mechanical, or artistic. Of the pictures which accompanied Mr. Binyon's "Western Flanders," the "Sand Dunes" will be found among our illustrations. It is a fair example of one side of Mr. Strang's landscape work, but gives no idea of the beauty of the other plates which accompanied it. Some of them show the most brilliant treatment of

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buildings, "Ghent Gate, Bruges" and "Towers at Courtrai" being noticeable for this. These architectural plates may well make the weaker brethren regret that the artist who produced them should spend time over subjects which make their flesh creep.

"Tam o' Shanter" (1884) is one of nine illustrations to "Burns's Poems," which were a very early series. All are equally remarkable for style and composition, and show a firmness and finality, as well as imagination, which is remarkable in so young a man.

Of all Mr. Strang's qualities this is the most impressive. He is always making experiments, always on the look-out for something worth doing, difficult and new; at one time studies in elaborate composition attract him; at another, intricacies of drawing; he exchanges the needle for the burin and the burin for the scraper; but every stroke with every tool is made with a definite, considered impulse. There is no vacillation, no weakness, no wavering.

GENERAL SUBJECTS

The etchings and engravings shown here which do not come under any special designation are scattered over a period of thirteen years, but are none of them very recent. It is, however, remarkable that though on a general view we cannot help noticing the looser, freer, more assured treatment of the subsequent plates, there is a continuity of style and of thought which shows not only an early maturity, but a very fruitful imagination.

The "Head of a Peasant" is an etched mezzotint—that is, there is a strong line underneath a sand ground,—and it was one of Mr. Strang's first efforts at original work. "The Carpenter's Shop," on a more elaborate plan, was etched a couple of years later. It is a study in composition, but the characteristic touch is the infant playing with the unfinished coffin. The heavy background keeps the simplicity undisturbed.

The "Woman Darning" reverts to the simpler style of Millet, who evidently exercised a great influence over Strang and Legros. There is a very slight bitten tone of sand grain on the plate, scraped in parts. "The Dissecting Room" is a strangely interesting etching when we have passed beyond the preliminary shudder; and although we may regret that great powers should be used in delineating horrors such as this and "The Slaughterhouse" we cannot help being attracted if we try to follow the mind of the artist, and see what his intention was. I doubt if such intentions are ever very

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definite. A vague emotion fills the mind of the writer or artist, and he translates it into his own particular means of expression. Dickens gives us "Paul Dombey" and "Smike"; Kipling harrows us with "The Mark of the Beast" and "Bertram and Bimi." Several of Mr. Strang's plates are equally terrible. But Dickens also gave us Pickwick and Betsy Trotwood and Cheeryble Brothers; and Kipling "In the Rukh," and Mr. Strang "Cupid Reaping." But the force of the subjects under discussion is undeniable. The arrangement of the figures in both "The Dissecting Room" and "The Slaughterhouse" is magnificent, and in the former the attitude of the man in the apron is masterly, and the foreshortening of the unfortunate "subject" very clever. "The Story" is an experiment in lighting, reminding us slightly of Rembrandt. At the time the plate was executed the etcher was also engaged on the portrait of Mr. Stephen, and on a mezzotint, "The Faggot Gatherer"; the three plates are amazingly different.

"The End," and "A Sale of Prints," were etched in 1889. The one is a brilliant extravaganza, such as Mr. Strang loves, not quite so trenchant as "Despair," but sufficiently dreadful; the other a laborious composition of an actual scene, some of the faces being portraits.

"The Cause of the Poor" is another sermon in copper. Like the "Socialists," it shows a group of people without any physical charm, in all sorts of attitudes, with here and there a humorous touch like the pose of the auctioneer's clerk in "A Sale of Prints."

They are clever compositions, finely executed etchings, and original fancies, but they are not beautiful. They are not intended to be. They appeal to a different faculty. Mr. Strang pleases everybody with something out of his vast store, but he has probably never executed a plate with the definite object of gratifying the taste of those who only like his beautiful subjects. He endeavours, I think, to avoid the weakness, the feeble execution, and flabby sentiment of some of those who have tried to mirror beauty and beauty alone in landscape and figure.

In drawing "A Fish Stall" he is gripped with a fine idea, difficult to carry out, but suitable to his genius, and when he has successfully executed it it does not occur to him to notice that people who crowd round gas flares are not the most comely in the world.

So in "The Hedger," which may be called a beautiful plate, the artist devotes his attention to the exquisite capacity of the "rocked" plate for giving subtle graduations of tone, and mysterious velvety depths, and to rendering as effectively as possible a graceful and

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natural attitude. That the result is pleasing to those who dislike horrors and street beggars is a mere accident.

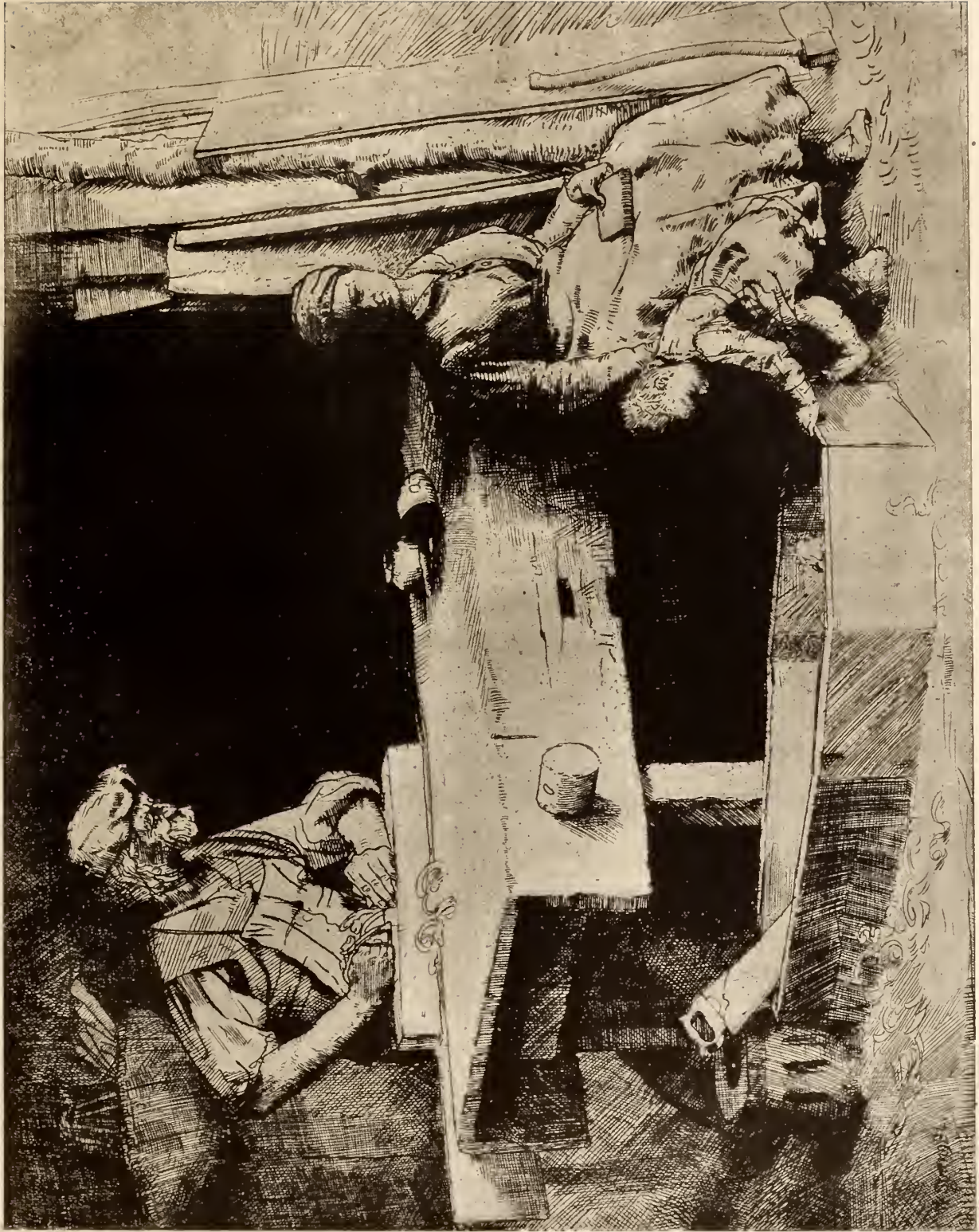
Those who admire "The Hedger" may do so because it is a good mezzotint, or merely because it is a mezzotint. Compare it with "The Fallen Cross," which is an engraving, and "Al Fresco," which is an etching rather softly printed, an Italianesque reminiscence. The difference is not only one of process, but the sharp burin line, mechanically cut, is easily distinguishable from the etched line eaten out by acid, and neither of them resembles the soft, woolly texture of the "rocked" surface.

"Evening" is an etched mezzotint. The grounded plate is passed through the printing press in contact with a piece of sandpaper. The plate is then bitten and also rocked, and scraped up like an ordinary mezzotint. The process is simple to describe and easy to understand, but uncommonly difficult to use effectively, especially without the rocking. It combines what is called sand grain, sandpaper mezzotint, and etched mezzotint. It has no connection with the mezzotinted etchings so familiar to every one in the *Liber Studiorum*.

ILLUSTRATIONS

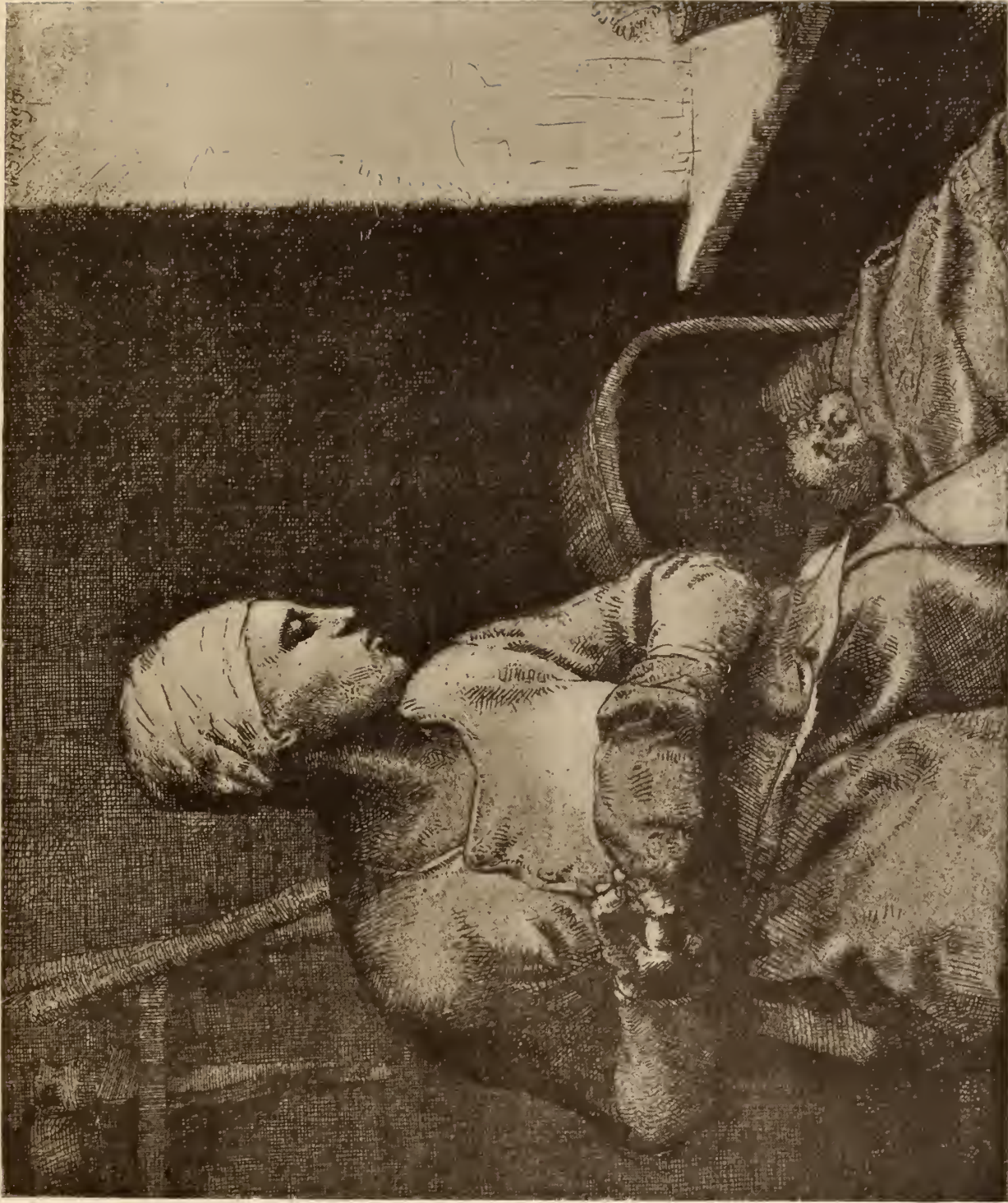


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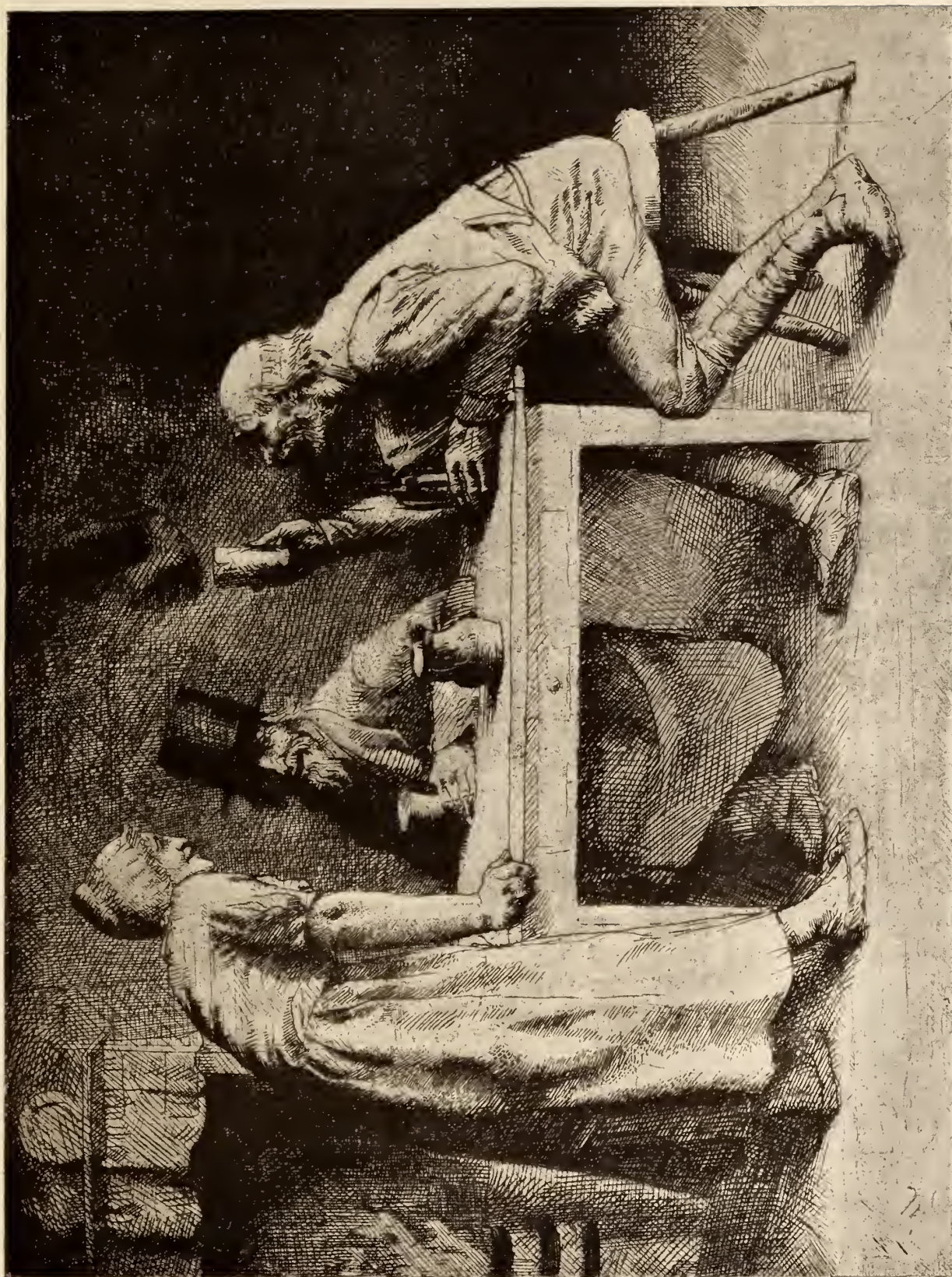
6 9/4 x 8

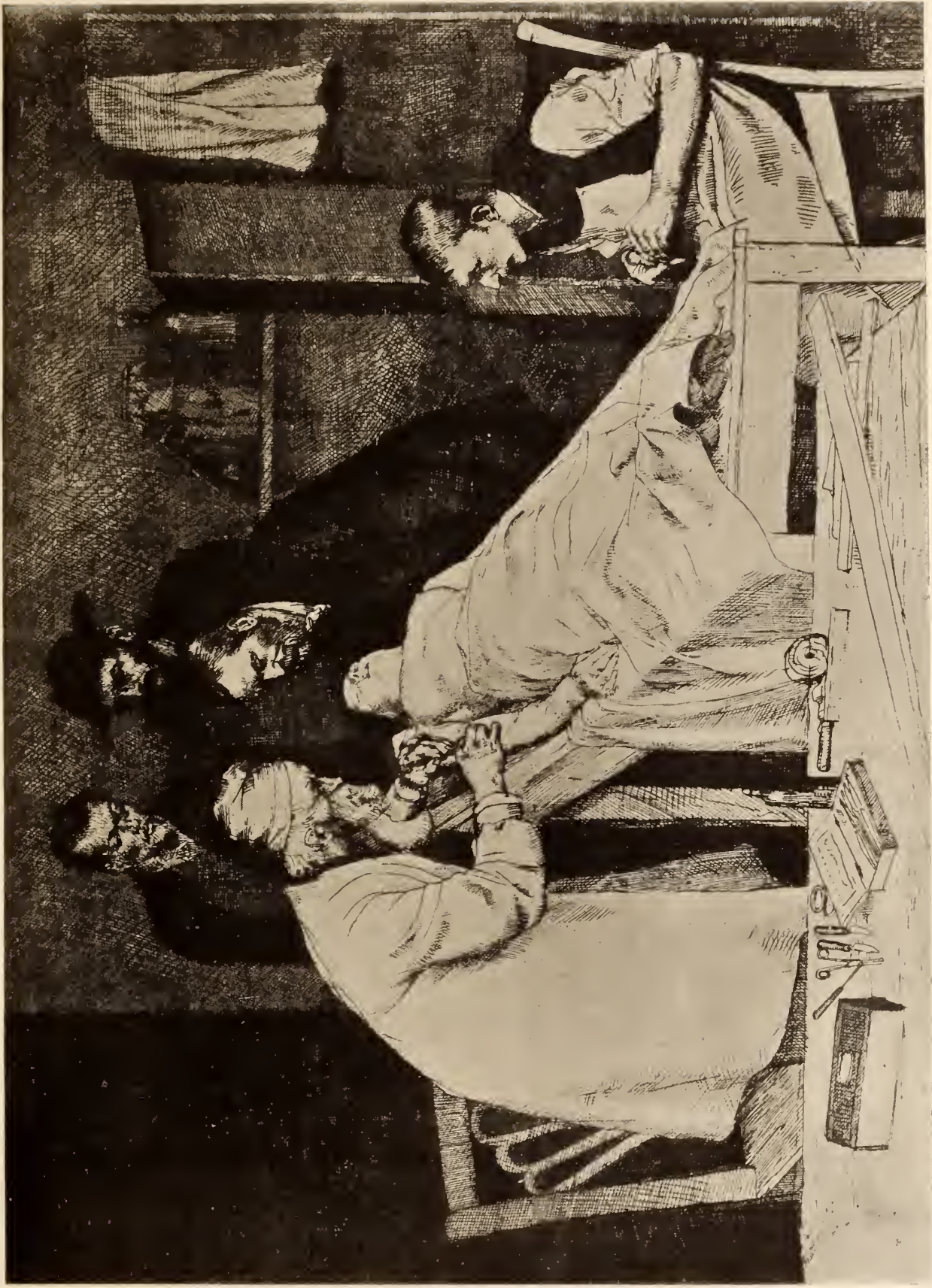


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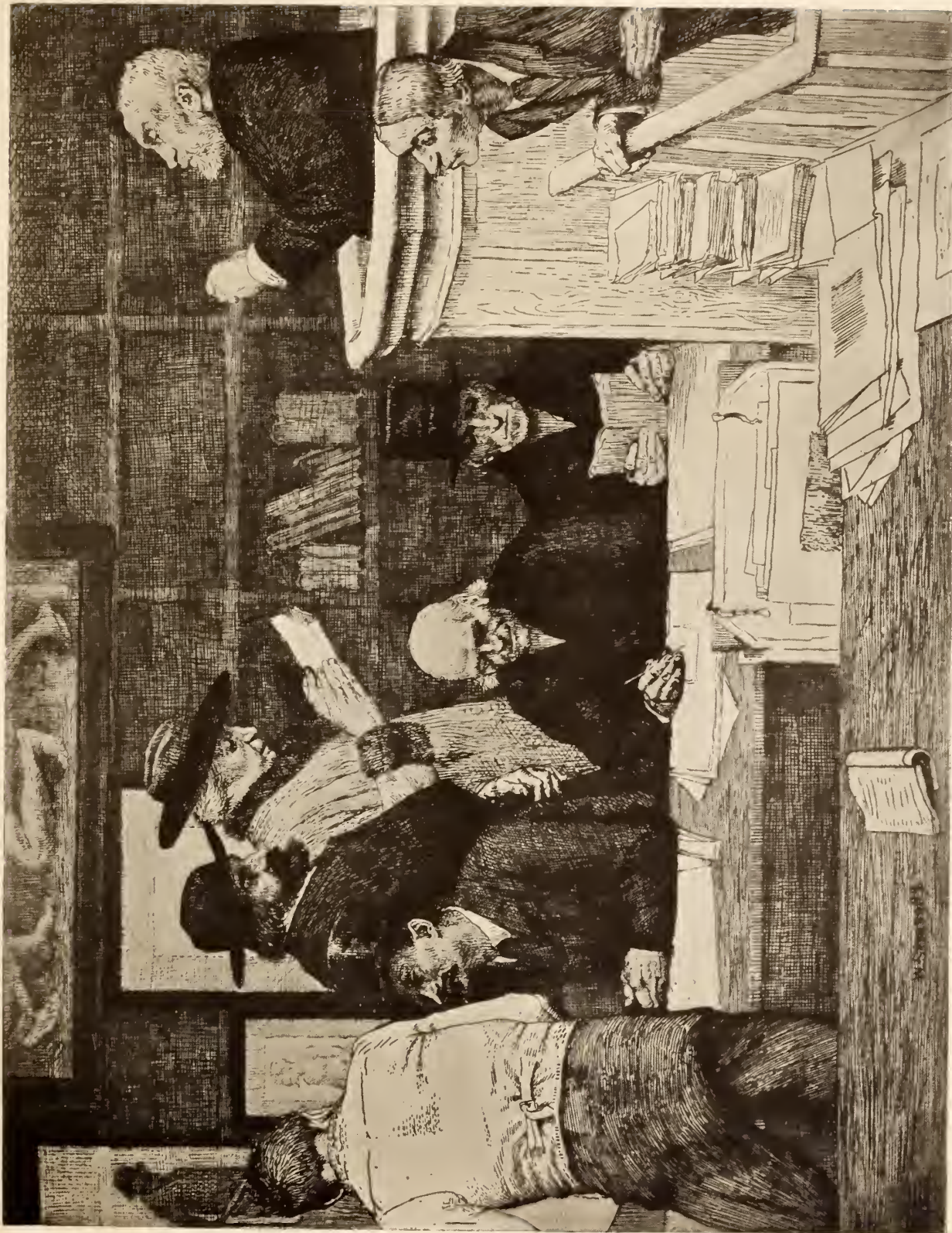
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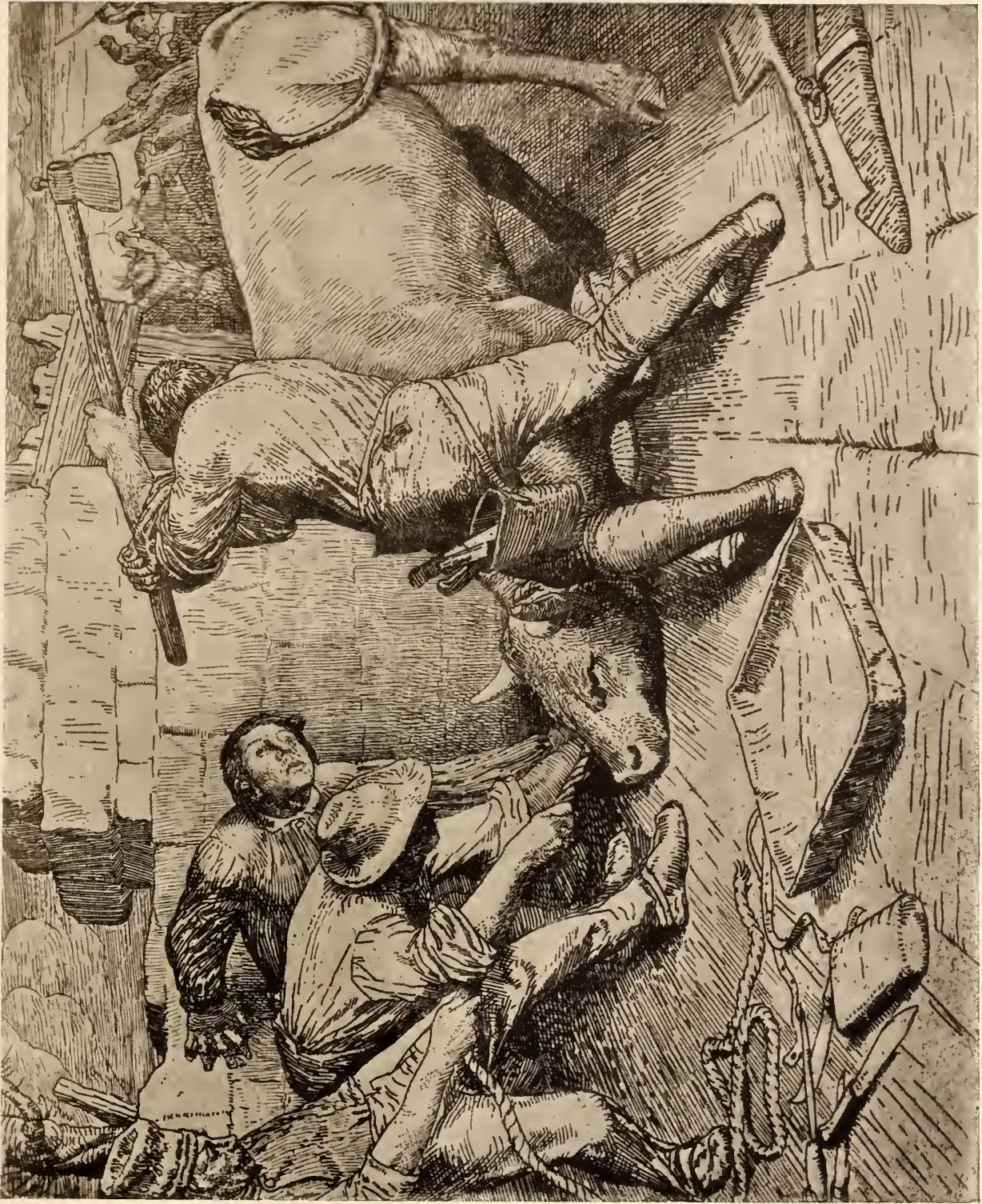
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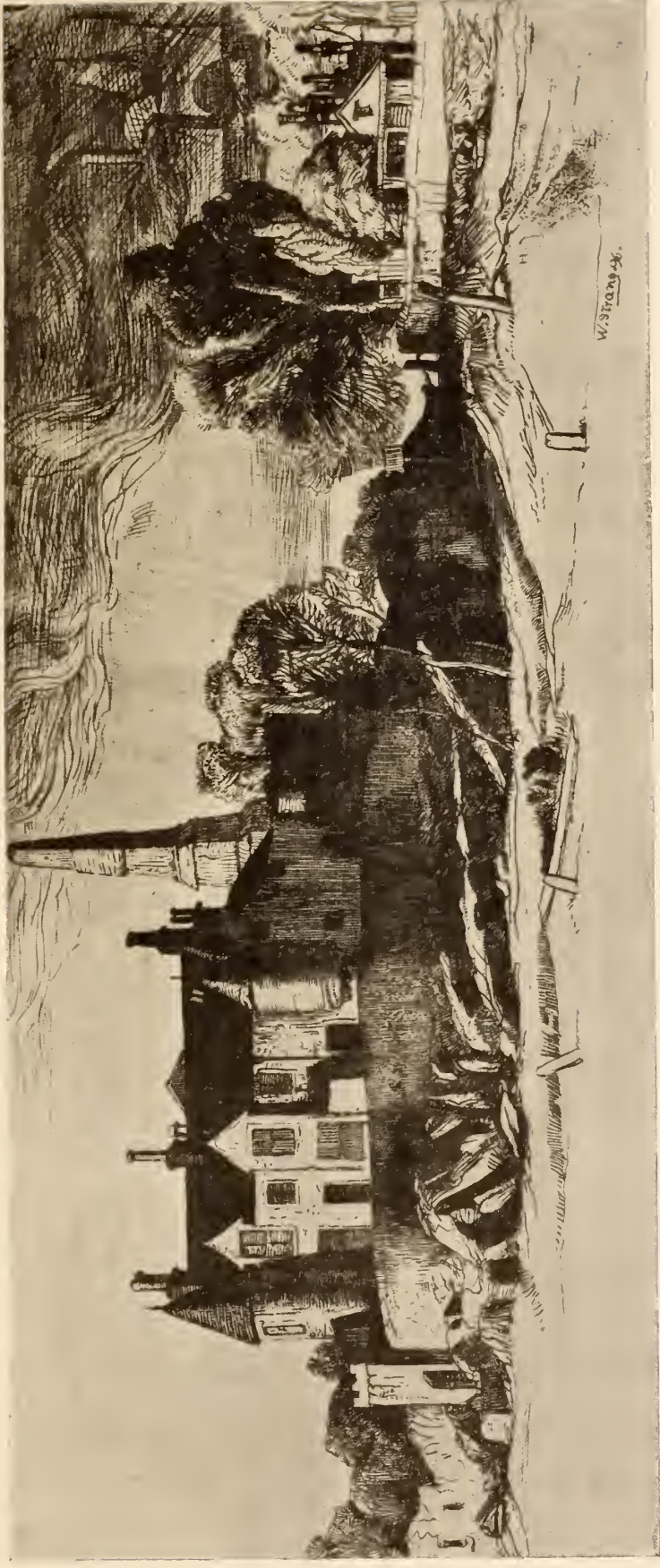


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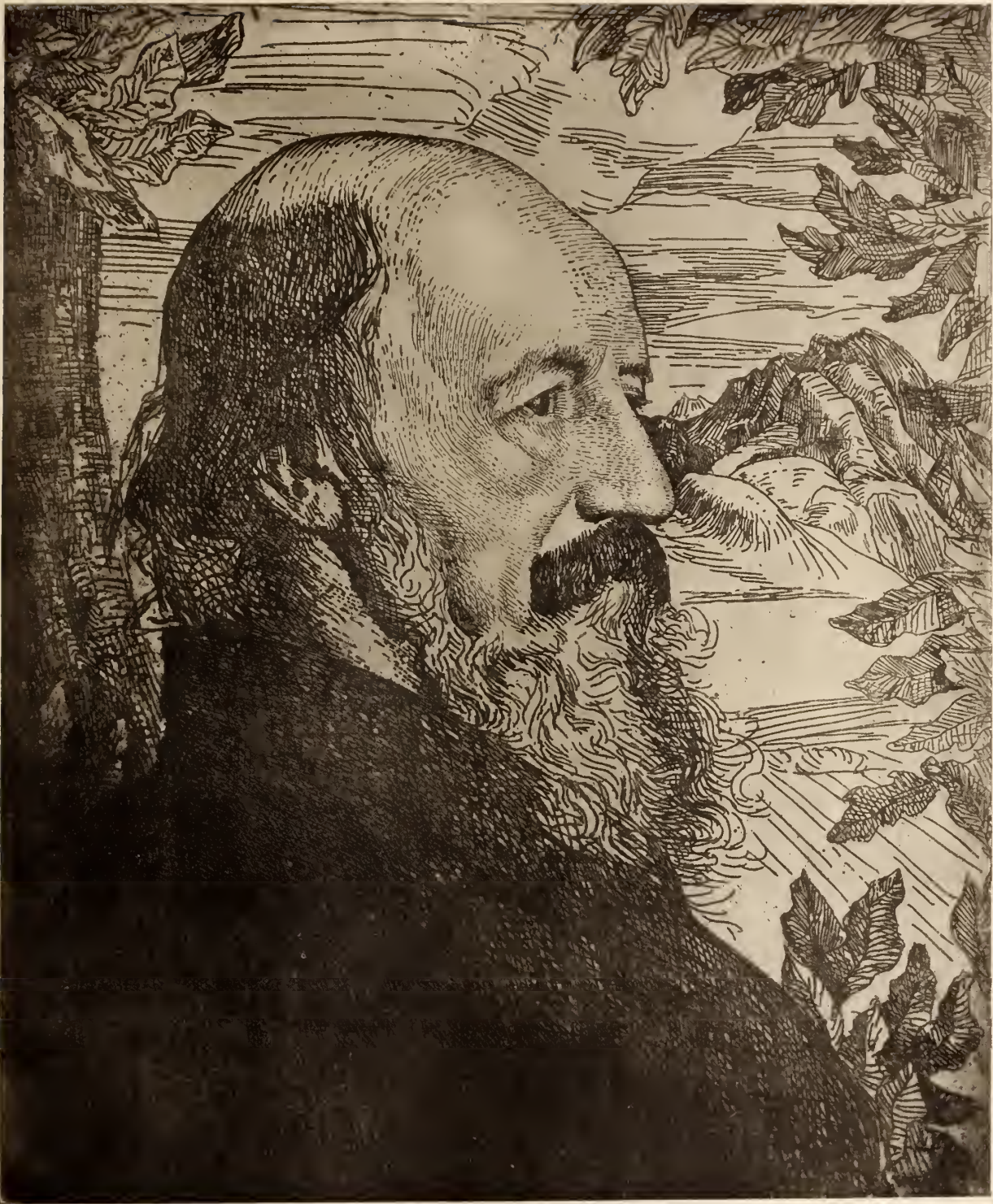
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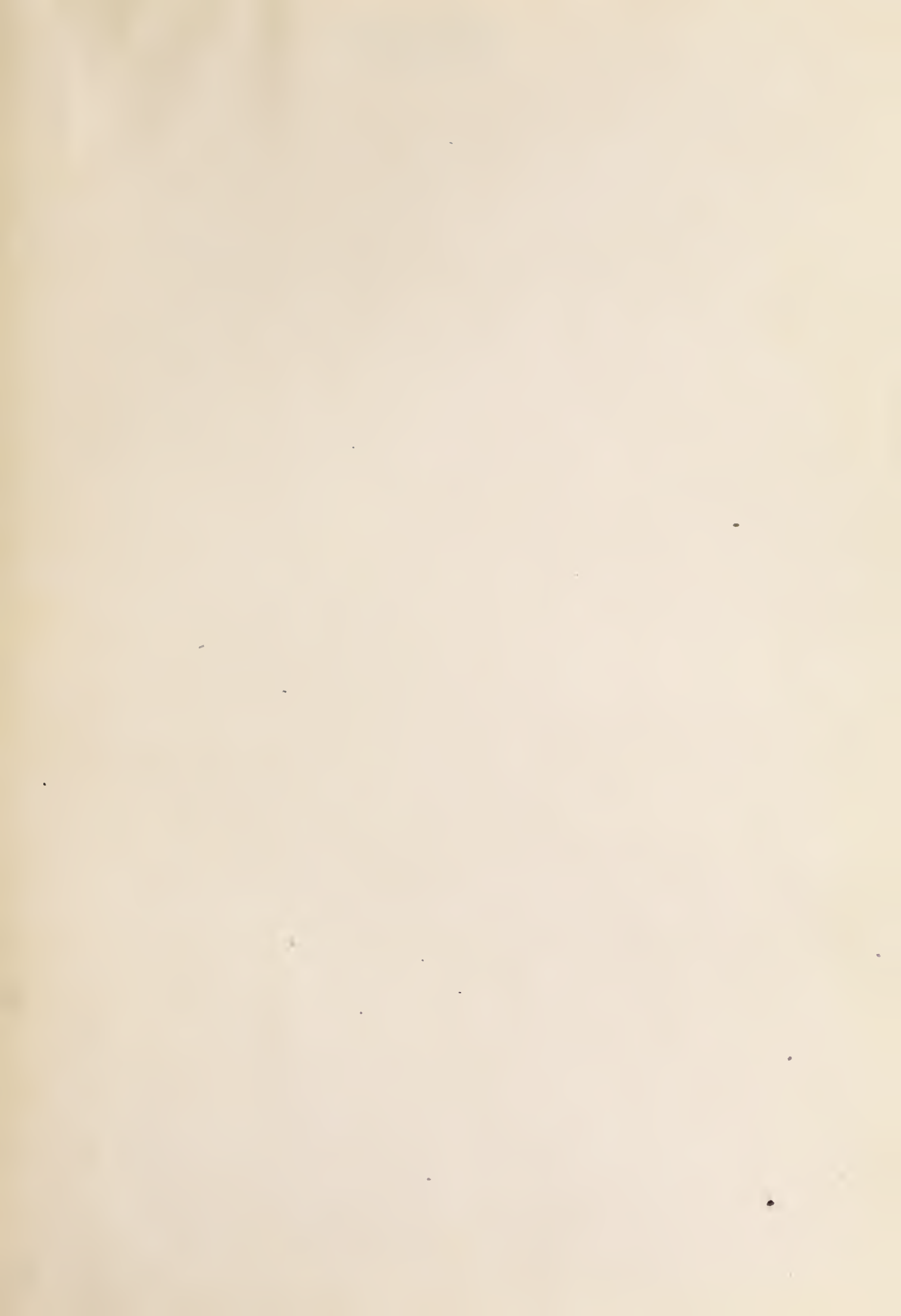
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